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Talking Points: Political Fallout from the Beirut Massacre

1. The revelations about the Shatilla and Sabra refugee camp massacres is arousing a domestic outcry in Israel that may well challenge Prime Minister Begin's hold on power. The key threat to Begin is the development of a Watergate-style political scandal in which the government's credibility is steadily eroded by a series of ever-more-shocking and embarrassing revelations.

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Begin is a proven survivor and many Israelis -- especially his Sephardic constituency -- will rally behind him out of nationalist sentiment. Nonetheless, the religious parties -- key Begin coalition partners -- seem particularly outraged by the moral dimensions of the massacre and want an independent investigation which Begin says he opposes.

- Should the two religious parties quit Begin's Likud coalition, Labor could form a new government with them and several leftist groups.
- Such a coalition would be very unstable, however.

The political polls showed widespread support for Begin before the massacre. Israeli opposition politicians now will eagerly await new polls to gauge shifts in opinion.

2. The massacre and Bashir Jumayyil's assassination have also highlighted the strains in the Israeli-Phalange alliance. Press reports indicate some Phalangists believe Israel had become disenchanted with Bashir before his death because Bashir would not sign a peace treaty with Tel Aviv. Some claim Israel encouraged dissident Maronites to work against Bashir and may even have had a role in his death.

- While this seems unlikely, it points up the growing tensions between some Maronites and Israel.

These reports also underscore Amin Jumayyil's problem in gaining full control over the Maronite military organizations. The Lebanese Forces militia were Bashir's creation and their loyalty was to him, not to the Jumayyil family. Israel doubtless will use its sympathizers in the Phalange and its Haddad allies to pressure Amin to be more forthcoming on the peace treaty issue.

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